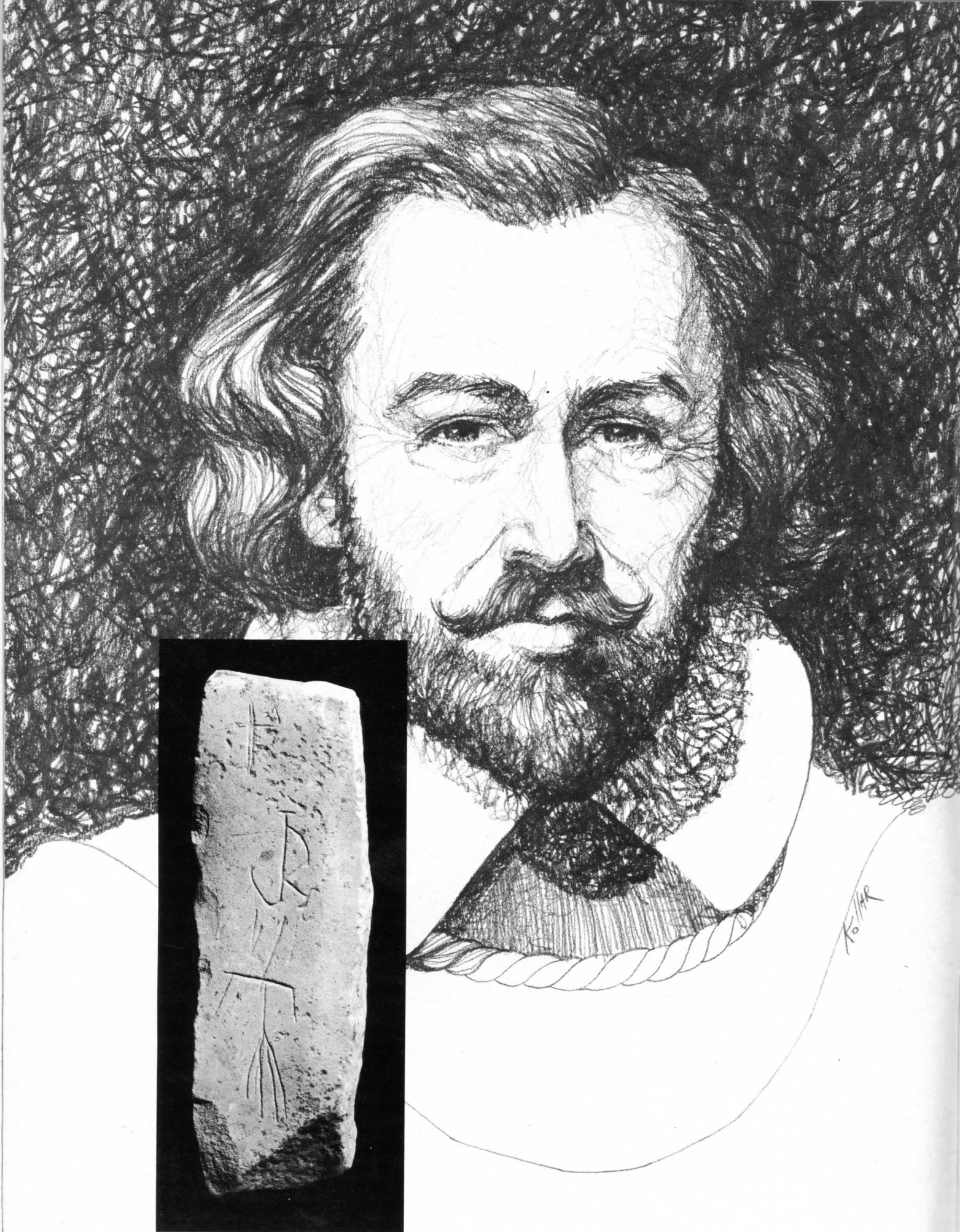


Westways

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By Brian McGinty

A Grave Discovery

A rudely carved sandstone, found on Santa Rosa Island in 1901, holds the key to an intriguing historical mystery—it may have once marked the grave of Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, discoverer of California

THE STONE is unimposing in appearance. A little more than a foot in length, two inches thick and four inches wide, its edges are rough and worn, and its flat, pocked face is rudely inscribed. A casual observer might be tempted to ignore it. In fact, the stone has been ignored for most of the seventy-odd years since it was found on the surface of an eroded archeological site on the windy coastal island of Santa Rosa. But the slab of sandstone is, perhaps, more significant than its appearance would suggest. Recent scientific examinations have surprisingly shown that it may be California's oldest historical relic.

The Channel Islands are little known to most Californians, who see them, if at all, as misty mountains rising mysteriously from the sea southwest of Santa Barbara. But they were well known to the first Europeans to explore the California coast—brave sailors in the service of the king of Spain, who sojourned among them

for nearly two months in the winter of 1542-43.

Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo was the commander of that first party of explorers in California. A conquistador who had come to Mexico in 1520 as a soldier in the Spanish expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez, he was probably Portuguese by birth. His surname, by which he was usually known in his own lifetime, was Rodríguez (spelled Rodrigues in Portuguese), but history has remembered him by his mother's family name of Cabrillo. He commanded a company of crossbowmen in Cortez' siege of the Aztec capital, and helped to build the thirteen brigantines that were used on Lake Texcoco for the final conquest of the city in 1521.

Joining Spanish forces in the conquest of Guatemala, Cabrillo was named by the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado as admiral of an expedition to explore the unknown coast north and west of Mexico. On June 27, 1542, he left the Mexican port of Navidad in command of two ships, the *San Salvador* and the *Victoria*. His expedition was later to be called a voyage "for the discovery of China." Its importance could not have been greater had the explorer, in fact, been destined for the distant gates of Cathay. Was the Aztec kingdom an island, or was it part of a continent

that lay between Europe and the Indies? When the *San Salvador* and the *Victoria* left Navidad in that summer of 1542—only fifty years after Columbus' first voyage of discovery—this question was still unanswered, and Cabrillo was charged with the momentous mission of charting the mysterious western edge of the new-found Spanish empire.

The bold expedition entered the coast of what is now California in September 1542. Touching at several points along the coast, Cabrillo and his men paused in October to rest on one of the lonely Channel Islands. There the explorer had the misfortune to fall, breaking an arm or, as some accounts have it, a leg. The injury did not heal properly, but Cabrillo continued up the coast for a time, passing the wooded slopes of Point Pinos and Monterey Bay, before turning south once again.

Passing the Santa Barbara Channel, the ships dropped anchor a second time at the island on which Cabrillo had fallen. "They remained at these islands from November 23 to January 19," the surviving account of the expedition records, "and in all this time, almost two months, there was very rough wintry and rainy weather." The Spaniards called the island La Isla de Posesion, though they noted that its Indian name was Ciquimuy-

No one knows what Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo actually looked like; opposite is an artist's conception. The sandstone bears a crude cross, the initials "JR" and a headless stick figure of a man

ILLUSTRATION BY EARNIE KOLLAR. BASED ON PHOTOGRAPH FROM SECURITY PACIFIC NATIONAL BANK; PHOTOGRAPH FROM LOWIE MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

mu. "While wintering at the Isla de Posesion," the account continues, "there passed from this present life, January 3, 1543, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, the captain of the ships, from a fall which he had in this island the previous time they were there. . . . He left as captain the chief pilot, who was one Bartolome Ferrelo, a native of the Levant, and strongly charged him at the time of his death not to fail to discover as much as possible of all that coast. They named this island the 'Isla de Juan Rodriguez.'"

Though he died on an obscure island off a remote and obscure coast, Cabrillo was well remembered in the centuries that followed as the discoverer of California. At intervals after 1770, attempts were made to discover the explorer's last resting place. Beads, arrowheads and countless skeletons were, over the years, casually unearthed on the islands. But efforts to find Cabrillo's grave were hampered by the winds and drifting sands that swept across the islands, and by the fragmentary surviving account of the expedition.

In 1899, Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst commissioned a medical doctor and amateur anthropologist to make archeological collections for the newly established Museum of Anthropology at the University of California in Berkeley. For three years, Dr. Philip Mills Jones worked for Mrs. Hearst at various sites in Northern and Southern California. In the early months of 1901, Jones was on the island of Santa Rosa, collecting arrowpoints, mortars and stones. One of the objects brought back by Dr. Jones was a slab of sandstone, rudely carved with a cross, the stick figure of a man and the enigmatic initials "JR." The stone was encrusted with lichens. Jones correctly identified it as half of an aboriginal grinding stone—probably used by the Indians for grinding seeds and grain. He noted the inscriptions on the stone's rough face, photographed them before and after the slab was cleaned with soap

and water, but attached little importance to them. The slab was stored with other artifacts collected on the trip and promptly forgotten.

Jones died in 1916. Forty years later, two professors of the University of California, Berkeley, edited and published the manuscript report of his collecting expedition of 1901, though they still paid no special attention to the inscribed slab of sandstone. In June 1972, Dr. Robert F. Heizer, one of the professors who had edited Jones's report, examined it for illustrations of a particular kind of flint implement. His eyes fastened on the photograph of the Santa Rosa sandstone. "It occurred to me then," Heizer wrote, "that the initials might be those of the discover of California, Juan Rodriguez, usually known as

Cabrillo." An anthropologist of international reputation, Heizer was slow to draw any conclusions about the origin of the stone. Carefully and methodically, he set about examining the slab, reading about Cabrillo and his voyage, and soliciting the assistance and opinions of competent experts.

The most striking feature of the stone was its rude inscription. The cross and initials seemed clearly to indicate European design. Someone familiar with Latin letters and a follower of the Christian faith most probably carved them. It was further apparent that the crude inscriptions were not the work of a skilled stone-cutter. Heizer noted that Cabrillo's death had been unexpected, and, according to the surviving account of the voyage, the Indians on the island were unfriendly, constantly fighting during the time the explorers were there. If the stone served as Cabrillo's gravestone, it would likely have been carved by a member of his crew, not expert in the art of stonecutting, and the task would have been performed hurriedly, to avoid attack by the Indians.

Microscopic examination of the incisions on the face of the sandstone showed they were made with a sharp instrument, and that the cross, initials and stick figure were probably cut at one time. Earlier, the stone had been flattened in the course of Indian grain grinding. Experiments with a similar piece of sandstone, also taken from Santa Rosa Island by Jones, showed that incisions of the kind found on the inscribed stone can readily be made with a metal implement, such as a heavy-duty sailor's knife. Efforts to reproduce the marks with a sharp-edged chert flake, such as the Indians might have used, proved unsuccessful.

Drawings of the sandstone were submitted to distinguished Spanish historians, along with an account of the circumstances of its discovery. They were asked to give opinions on the stylistic authenticity of the stone.

A statue of the explorer stands in Cabrillo National Monument at Point Loma, where there is also a replica of the sandstone



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When Dr. Philip Mills Jones found and photographed the small stone slab, it was encrusted with lichens. He discovered it on lonely Santa Rosa Island, somewhere between Skunk Point and East Point

Of particular note was a curious stroke at the foot of the "R." Could this curving line be an "S," intended to represent the last letter of the explorer's name as it would have been spelled in Portugal? Or was it just a fancy finial, intended for decoration? Professor Manuel Ballesteros Gaibrois of the University of Madrid wrote: "The letters 'J' and 'R' are very clear and the final stroke on the latter could be interpreted as a 'C.' It can correspond to the style of written capitals of Roman type, used on inscriptions of that period, at which time they no longer employed Gothic lettering." Professor Claudio Esteva-Fabregat of the University of Barcelona wrote: "Stylistically, we are dealing with a tombstone which forms part of the Spanish funerary tradition. Its characteristics show that it seems to have been engraved by a person that did not control very well the technique of stone working. It is certain that, being a military expedition, there were probably no specialists and . . . they had to improvise in engraving the stone." Esteva-Fabregat added: "With respect to the distribution of elements, the cross as well as the name and surname, all are cor-

rect. It is not important that dates do not appear, because in those times they were not concerned with 'chronology.' The important thing was to bury him with symbols to indicate the name, surname, and religion of the deceased."

The possibility that the sandstone is a fake, cleverly fashioned to deceive students of history, was seriously considered by Heizer. Dr. Jones drew no attention to the slab, and, when he died, it was still resting in musty obscurity. There were growths of lichens on the stone when Jones first photographed it in 1901. Though he removed most of the growths by cleaning, enough remained in 1972 to show—with an examination of the original photographs—that the lichens could have been ten years old in 1901. If the stone is a fake, it is clear that Philip Mills Jones did not author it.

That the sandstone was found on Santa Rosa Island rather than San Miguel Island is a fact of further interest. Most historians had assumed that Cabrillo was buried on San Miguel—though historical evidence on the question is unclear. If a hoax were intended, the perpetrator would, most likely, have arranged for the stone to be found on San Miguel. It is possible that the slab was covered with earth until ten years or so before Jones's discovery, when it was moved and exposed to the air, and the growth of lichens began.

All this, of course, is speculation, as Heizer is ready to admit. Known

methods of scientific dating cannot determine the age of the stone. "Without the means of proving that the stone is or is not the one which marked Cabrillo's grave," Heizer says, "we are simply left with the possibility that it may be that marker." But the anthropologist is impressed by the simplicity of the sandstone slab—and the obscure manner of its discovery. "I do believe it is highly probable we have here the stone . . . carved in 1543 and set over the grave of Cabrillo," Heizer has written.

That belief was strengthened recently when further analysis of the Indian name for La Isla de Posesion, Ciquimuymu, revealed that this was the island which later became known as Santa Rosa. The evidence that Cabrillo died on Santa Rosa rather than on San Miguel enhances the possibility that the sandstone was used to mark his resting place.

The sandstone is now displayed in a glass case in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology at UC Berkeley, where it remains available for study by serious and qualified scholars. If the sandstone is, in fact, the gravestone of the discoverer of California, it would be a relic of awesome significance—the oldest relic of European civilization in California, a tangible link with the bold age of the conquistadors. Until its authenticity is conclusively proved or disproved, the stone will remain an historical mystery—but a mystery of uncommon interest and fascination. W